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Book Reviews



THE ART OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND. By Catherine Karkov. Pp. 348, Illus 94. The Boydell Press, 2011. Price: £45.00. ISBN 978 1 843836 28 5.

There are several classic works on Anglo-Saxon art, but whether written by archaeologists or historians, the majority are primarily concerned with deciphering origins, influences and stylistic developments. What sets this original and thought-provoking book apart from its precursors is that it shifts attention away from how individual artworks stand in relation to one another, towards how they stand in relation to contemporary people. The driving force behind Karkov's socially-informed investigation is the explicit application of postcolonial theory and, in particular, the concept of hybridity, to unmask 'how art works to create and narrate the processes of becoming a culture or a nation, and to map its changing identities' (p. 1).

Karkov navigates her subject in six thematic chapters: 'The Art of Origins', 'Sacred Space', 'Art, Status and Authority', 'Object and Voice', 'Books, Words and Bodies', and 'Art and Conquest'. Each theme is explored using a range of case studies drawn from a variety of media — architecture, sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, metalwork, and other portable objects, such as ivories. In terms of scope, the selection of case studies is weighted heavily towards 'high end' art most susceptible to detailed contextual readings: manuscripts dominate several parts of the discussion and personal items — a good many inscribed — fall exclusively at the prestige end of the spectrum. On the other hand, the book strikes a good balance in terms of revisiting canonical works such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Ruthwell Cross, the Franks Casket, and the Alfred Jewel and charting new artistic territory opened up by such recent discoveries as the Lichfield Angel, the Prittlewell Prince, and the Staffordshire and the Vale of York hoards.

What most impresses about Karkov's study is her deft ability to read the nuance, double meanings and encrypted symbolism of contemporary artworks — a key to recognizing their agency and power to entrance, beguile and captivate Anglo-Saxon audiences. Central here is the weight Karkov places on both the abstract and the representational content of artistic compositions. Thus interlace emerges as much more than a decorative space-filler, but, depending on context, as a visual cue designed to establish temporal and spatial connections between different elements of a narrative composition, or, alternatively, as a visual glue — a means of enmeshing and concealing in order to prompt the viewer to meditate on hidden meanings. Time and time again, Karkov brings to light the significance of detail easily dismissed as incidental, as, for example, the way in which the artist of the celebrated frontispiece of the New Minster Liber Vitae has deliberately depicted Cnut's sword so as to break the surrounding frame, in the process symbolically accenting the king's martial prowess and the authority of his rule.

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There really is very little to criticize in this masterful survey. If there is one complaint, it is that the figures are not accompanied by scales, surely an omission in a study which attempts to convey contemporary artwork's impact on the senses. As a final point, while consciously packaged as an 'art-historical survey', I would encourage archaeologists to read this book, not least because it points towards avenues of interpretation equally relevant to a broader social spectrum of 'minor' art proliferated by routine excavation and the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

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